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The Bricolage of a Myth: Re-reading Derrida Reading Lévi-Strauss Fifty Years After

M. C. McGrady

Cardiff University

E-mail: mcgradymc@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

Of all the presentations at the 1966 symposium ‘The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man’, none have been so thoroughly mythologized as Jacques Derrida’s reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss in ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences’. With this paper, Derrida was said to have unseated Lévi-Strauss from his privileged position in ethnology, prefiguring a more thorough critique that would appear later in *Of Grammatology*. However, looking past the now-hegemonic memory of these critiques reveals more nuanced and problematic operations in both writers’ work than the popular histories allow for. By reconsidering Derrida’s readings with a closer attention to Lévi-Strauss’s writing, augmented by an alternate perspective offered by Audre Lorde, one can begin to unravel the texts in question from the myths that have grown around them in order to better understand the role of ethnocentrism and self-criticism in the work of both thinkers.

Keywords: *Derrida, Lévi-Strauss, Audre Lorde, structuralism, Of Grammatology, Tristes Tropiques, ethnocentrism*

Of all the presentations at the 1966 symposium ‘The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man’, none have been so thoroughly mythologized as Jacques Derrida’s reading of Claude Lévi-Strauss in ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’. The Johns Hopkins Humanities Center itself singles out Derrida’s presentation, and at the Center’s own 50th anniversary conference, five of the fourteen presentations discussed Derrida or Lévi-Strauss.¹ In simple numbers, while the contributions of other notable names in French theory – including Jean Hippolyte, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan – have been cited hundreds of times in the subsequent fifty years of Anglophone writing, Derrida’s essay has been included in thousands of books and articles, and more than that has become an integral moment in the popular memory of his life. When Derrida died in 2004, *The New York Times* described Derrida’s presence at the symposium as his ‘triumphant’ appearance ‘on the American intellectual landscape’, an event made more appropriately serendipitous thanks to the role of chance in his arrival; Derrida was a late replacement, taking over the time scheduled for the absent anthropologist Luc de Heusch, and was invited on the recommendation of Hippolyte, who said that ‘I think he would be somebody who would come.’²

¹ See ‘A Brief History of the Humanities Center’; available at <http://humctr.jhu.edu/history/index.html>, and ‘The Structuralist Controversy and Its Legacy 1966 Anniversary Conference’; available at http://humctr.jhu.edu/events/1966_Anniversary [both accessed 24 November 2017].

² Peter Salmon, ‘Derrida vs. the Rationalists’, *New Humanist*, 30 January 2017; available at <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/5143/derrida-vs-the-rationalists> [accessed 24 November 2017], and

While Frances Ferguson describes the *New York Times* obituary as ‘ungenerous’, arguing that the form ‘suggests that we will never have occasion to esteem any writer’s work any more than (some) popular opinion did immediately after their deaths’,³ reconsidering the importance of ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’ on the occasion of the symposium’s fiftieth anniversary and after its principal contributors have passed is arguably the most appropriate way to reflect on Derrida’s early work. In the Preface to *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, the editors note that in formulating the four days of presentations and discussion, the organizers ‘were not seeking to promote a manifesto nor even to arrive at a fixed and unambiguous definition of structuralism itself’, partially because ‘satisfactory definitions of such polymorphic activities, or cultural events, are generally only achieved after the principals are safely dead.’⁴ As Lévi-Strauss died in 2009, remarking shortly before his passing that ‘the world on which I am finishing my existence is no longer a world that I like’, both characters in the defining presentation of the symposium are safely dead.⁵

The symposium was ostensibly intended as an introduction to the ‘polymorphic activities’ known as structuralism, and Derrida’s decision to focus his presentation on Lévi-Strauss was partially based on the impression that ‘the thought of Lévi-Strauss weighs heavily on the contemporary theoretical situation’, though this was not the only or primary reason.⁶ While Lévi-Strauss was not part of the symposium in an official capacity, the editors of *The Structuralist Controversy* made sure to thank him for his ‘counsel and encouragement’.⁷ However, rather than merely introducing structuralism as it appears in Lévi-Strauss, in popular histories Derrida was said to have unseated Lévi-Strauss from his privileged position in theoretical discussions, prefiguring a more thorough critique that would appear later in Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*. According to *The New York Times*, Derrida ‘shocked his American audience by announcing that structuralism was already passé in France, and that Mr. Lévi-Strauss’s ideas were too rigid.’⁸ In the *New Humanist*’s recollection, Derrida ‘had come not to praise structuralism but to bury it, and, according to some, to bury with it the very foundations of philosophy. [...] Here, at a symposium created to introduce structuralism to America, he had destroyed its very foundations.’⁹ Hyperbolic recollections of these sort are both too generous to Derrida’s reading while not doing justice to the importance of the problems he raises, both in his own work and that of Lévi-Strauss.

The most succinct account of Derrida’s understanding of Lévi-Strauss can be found near the end of ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’, where Derrida

Jonathan Kandell, ‘Jacques Derrida, Abstruse Theorist, Dies At 74’, *The New York Times*, 10 October 2004; available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/10/obituaries/jacques-derrida-abstruse-theorist-dies-at-74.html> [accessed 24 November 2017].

³ Frances Ferguson, ‘Jacques Derrida and the Critique of the Geometrical Mode: The Line and the Point’, *Critical Inquiry* 33.2 (2007): 313.

⁴ *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. and intr. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), xv.

⁵ ‘Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss Remembered’, NPR, 3 November 2009 (radio); available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120066035>. [accessed 24 November 2017].

⁶ Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in Macksey and Donato, 252; hereafter cited as *SSP* with page reference in the text.

⁷ Macksey and Donato, xvii.

⁸ Kandell.

⁹ Salmon.

perceives in [Lévi-Strauss's] work a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence in speech – an ethic, nostalgia, and even remorse which he often presents as the motivation of the ethnological project when he moves toward archaic societies – exemplary societies in his eyes. These texts are well known. (*SSP*, 264)

Derrida describes this ethic 'as a turning toward the presence, lost or impossible, of the absent origin, [...] the sad, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty Rousseauist facet of the thinking of freeplay' (*SSP*, 264). The texts Derrida describes as 'well known' remain unnamed in 'Structure, Sign, and Play', but the critique of Lévi-Strauss offered there is expanded and refined in *Of Grammatology*, where Derrida identifies in Lévi-Strauss a 'traditional and fundamental ethnocentrism [...] thought of as an anti-ethnocentrism' that pervades the latter's memoir, *Tristes Tropiques*.¹⁰ In Derrida's reading, *Tristes Tropiques* reveals that Lévi-Strauss maintains an unidentified ethnocentrism in his interactions with and recollections of indigenous people, an interpersonal ethnocentrism that comes to influence and determine Lévi-Strauss's theoretical work. However, rather than citing *Tristes Tropiques* in 'Structure, Sign, and Play', Derrida takes the opportunity to consider the primary theoretical function in Lévi-Strauss's work that problematizes the standards by which one would even begin to judge ethnocentrism.

Derrida begins 'Structure, Sign, and Play' by considering 'an "event"' in 'the whole history of the concept of structure' that takes the 'form of a *rupture* and a *redoubling*', tied to the reciprocal 'destruction' of metaphysics by writers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, despite how 'naïve' Derrida suggests it is 'to refer to an event, a doctrine, or an author to designate this occurrence' (*SSP*, 247, 249-50). To help understand this 'rupture', Derrida chooses to discuss ethnology, suggesting 'that there is nothing fortuitous about the fact that the critique of ethnocentrism – the very condition of ethnology – should be systematically and historically contemporaneous with the destruction of the history of metaphysics.' (*SSP*, 252) However, because the critique of ethnocentrism cannot escape its own discourse, and thus cannot help but reproduce ethnocentrism in whatever form, 'whether he wants to or not – and this does not depend on a decision on his part – the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he is employed in denouncing them.' (*SSP*, 252) At the same time, even 'if nobody can escape this necessity, and if no one is therefore responsible for giving in to it, however little, this does not mean that all the ways of giving in to it are of an equal pertinence.' (*SSP*, 252) Rather, Derrida argues, 'the quality and fecundity of a discourse are perhaps measured by the critical rigor with which this relationship to the history of metaphysics and to inherited concepts is thought.' (*SSP*, 252) This is the standard by which Derrida evaluates Lévi-Strauss's work, and most of 'Structure, Sign, and Play' concerns itself with the way this tension – 'the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself' (*SSP*, 252) – plays itself out in Lévi-Strauss's version of structuralism.

While Derrida points out where this tension arises '*in a more or less explicit manner*' at a variety of different points in Lévi-Strauss's writing, it is most explicit in his account of *bricolage*, or what Lévi-Strauss describes as using 'the means at hand' to

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed., trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 121.

perform ‘the task in hand’.¹¹ This is precisely what Derrida describes when referencing the ‘destruction of metaphysics’ and the acceptance of ethnocentrism necessary for its denouncing. Derrida describes bricolage as the discourse of Lévi-Strauss’s method, explaining that this approach consists of ‘conserving in the field of empirical discovery all these old concepts, while at the same time exposing here and there their limits, treating them as tools which can still be of use.’ (SSP, 254) Derrida notes that while Lévi-Strauss is ‘more or less explicit’ when making these locally teleological choices, if one accepts Lévi-Strauss’s account of bricolage, then it quickly becomes clear that ‘the analysis of *bricolage* could “be applied almost word for word” to criticism, and especially to “literary criticism”’ (SSP, 256), and indeed, all discourse. At a glance, Lévi-Strauss’s particular notion of bricolage would seem to mean that he has exhibited at least some of the critical rigour Derrida suggests is necessary to determine ‘the quality and fecundity of a discourse’, but if this were the case Derrida’s critique would not proceed as it does. Before considering this, however, it is more instructive to see how this question, of accepting a discourse one seeks to critique, has been framed in a related but fundamentally different context.

In very general terms, Derrida’s framing of the critique of ethnocentrism and Lévi-Strauss’s articulation of bricolage offer a theoretical model of the material problems addressed by Audre Lorde in her 1979 presentation ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, given at the Second Sex conference on feminist theory in New York. In her speech, Lorde reflected on the conference’s representative failures, and particularly ‘the absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of Third World women’, as ‘it is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences’.¹² Lorde argues that genuinely radical theory depends on ‘learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.’¹³ Lorde’s language here is remarkably similar to Derrida’s, with the crucial difference that while Lorde keeps open the possibility of ‘genuine change’ despite the hegemonic structures always reasserting themselves through the uncritical application of discourse, Derrida only allows for the possibility of a change in monstrous terms.

In concluding ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’, Derrida too speaks of difference, noting the ‘difference of this irreducible difference’ that occurs in the constant substitutions of discourse, but he does so while denying the possibility of a humanist end to criticism (SSP, 264-5). Instead, Derrida uses heavily gendered language to describe his own thinking as surrendering ‘itself to *genetic* indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace’ in the face of ‘a sort of question, call it historical, of which we are only glimpsing today the *conception*, the *formation*, the *gestation*, the *labor*.’ (SSP, 264, 265; emphases in the original) Derrida uses this language

with a glance toward the business of childbearing – but also with a glance toward those who, in a company from which I do not exclude myself, turn their eyes away in the face of the as yet unnameable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the non-species, in the formless, mute, infant and terrifying form of monstrosity. (SSP, 265)

¹¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 16; SSP, 255.

¹² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2008), 110-1.

¹³ Lorde, 112.

With this the difference between Lorde's 'dismantling' and Derrida's 'deconstruction' become clear, because where Derrida locates this gendered monstrosity apart from himself, something that he (like others) must turn his eyes away from, Lorde argues that is possible and necessary for 'each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there.'¹⁴ In this light, Derrida seems at the end of 'Structure, Sign, and Play' to have fallen short of his own standard, as the critical rigour he applies to the question of ethnocentrism dissipates with the arrival of his gendered language, which simultaneously perpetuates the patriarchal association of epistemology with the 'the seminal' while denying the possibility of radical change.

Considering Derrida's problematic conclusion to 'Structure, Sign, and Play' in light of Lorde's analysis in turn illuminates Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss's 'ethnocentrism [...] thought of as an anti-ethnocentrism', which Derrida seems to consider a naïve impulse toward liberatory change that – due to a lack of critical rigour – reproduces the structures it seeks to dismantle. Derrida notes that he 'does not seek in ethnography, as Lévi-Strauss wished, the "inspiration of a new humanism"' (*SSP*, 265), nor does he look to the past, or to what Derrida calls Lévi-Strauss's 'exemplary' societies for inspiration. The bulk of Derrida's critique in *Of Grammatology* is concerned with Lévi-Strauss's interactions with one such society, the Nambikwara, who lived in what is now the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil. Derrida claims that Lévi-Strauss's account 'sets up a premise – the goodness or innocence of the Nambikwara', in contrast to 'The Jesuits, the Protestant missionaries, the American anthropologists', whom Lévi-Strauss seems to view with some contempt.¹⁵ Derrida accuses Lévi-Strauss of allowing this premise, of 'the radical goodness of the Nambikwara', to determine his analysis, and particularly his experience introducing writing to the Nambikwara people.¹⁶

However, Derrida's reading here stumbles because the opposition he identifies in Lévi-Strauss's account of the Nambikwara, between the 'good' indigenous people and the 'bad' Americans and Europeans, is not supported by the texts Derrida cites. While Derrida repeatedly references 'the radical goodness of the Nambikwara', 'the innocence of the Nambikwara', and 'the fundamental goodness and virginal innocence of the Nambikwara',¹⁷ Lévi-Strauss simply never uses these terms to describe them. Instead, in the passage Derrida uses as the primary evidence for his claim regarding the binary of virginal, innocent Nambikwara and guilty white interlopers in Lévi-Strauss's work, Lévi-Strauss is actually attempting to point toward a shared kinship between himself (as an interloper) and the indigenous people he finds himself living alongside. Recalling a passage he 'wrote one night by the light of [his] pocket-lamp', Lévi-Strauss considers the calm that persists in the camp despite 'the fearful and hostile' tribes in the surrounding area or 'the difficulties of every day':

Their embraces are those of couples possessed by a longing for a lost oneness; their caresses are no wise disturbed by the footfall of a stranger. In one and all there may be glimpsed a great sweetness of nature, a profound nonchalance, an animal satisfaction as

¹⁴ Lorde, 113.

¹⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 116-7.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 118.

¹⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 118-9.

ingenuous as it is charming, and, beneath all this, something that can be recognized as one of the most moving and authentic manifestations of human tenderness.¹⁸

Derrida reads Lévi-Strauss's use of 'sweetness of nature', 'ingenuous', and 'human tenderness' to mean goodness and innocence, which two pages later becomes 'fundamental goodness and virginal innocence'.¹⁹ The last of these lexical mutations is particularly remarkable as Lévi-Strauss seems to be describing at least some of Nambikwara literally having sex. While this passage undoubtedly demonstrates a particular mode of sentimentality on Lévi-Strauss's part that identifies the actions of indigenous people as being somehow more 'authentic' than Western society, Derrida's reading moves past what the text supports to identify a dichotomy where none exists. Derrida admits that Lévi-Strauss's recollection, as travel journal, is 'something that could be considered the least scientific expression of a thought', and this generic consideration coupled with Lévi-Strauss's actual language suggests that while problematic, this recollection is nowhere near as uncritical as Derrida suggests, undermining the critique of Lévi-Strauss's supposedly unrecognized ethnocentrism.²⁰

In fact, Lévi-Strauss offers a more complex characterization of the relationship between indigenous people and European and American interventions in South America, as evidenced in the moment of *Tristes Tropiques* where he actually does use 'innocent' to describe an indigenous population. Lévi-Strauss only uses 'innocent' to refer to Native people once in the entirety of *Tristes Tropiques*, when considering his journey to meet 'unknown' Native people living near the Rio Pimenta Bueno in light of four hundred years of colonization:

Distant as they were from the western world [...], they had been pulverized by the development of western civilization. For them, as for so large and so innocent a fraction of the human race, this development had come as a monstrous and unintelligible cataclysm. We in the West should remember that that development has put upon the matter a second face, as truthful and as indelible as its predecessor.²¹

Here, the only people described as 'innocent' are those victims of colonization who, by definition, are innocent of both the initial interventions and their ongoing legacy. In this case, Lévi-Strauss is not setting up an unreasonable premise that depends on the assumption of a 'radical goodness' on the part of indigenous people, but rather an undeniable guilt on the part of any and all who continue to benefit from colonization, a group of which Lévi-Strauss acknowledges he is a part. While the 'guilt' and 'remorse' Derrida finds in Lévi-Strauss may very well inform his personal recollections of the Nambikwara and the wistful tone of *Tristes Tropiques*, the guilt of one party does not denote a fundamental innocence of the other, in the same way that recognizing Derrida's exaggerations in reading Lévi-Strauss does not obviate the problematic discourse in the latter's work.

While the popular memories of Derrida's contribution to the 'Languages of Criticisms and the Sciences of Man' colloquium may take another half century to correct, this analysis seeks to begin this process by considering how Derrida's reading corresponds to the standards he articulates. Rereading Derrida and Lévi-Strauss in this

¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York: Criterion Books, 1961), 285.

¹⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 118.

²⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 119.

²¹ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 319.

light helps to untangle the myths that have arisen around them, revealing more nuanced and problematic operations in both writers' work at the time than the popular histories of today would allow. Lévi-Strauss offers a problematic critique of colonialism subtler than the binary Derrida reads into it, and by choosing to adopt a gendered metaphor without critiquing patriarchy as such, Derrida seems to fall short of the critical standard he sets at the outset. This more nuanced understanding of Derrida's early writing and the readings of Lévi-Strauss it contains should prompt a more widespread revaluation of both theorists' contributions to criticism, not to seek some popular consensus about the esteem they deserve, but to continue the work of questioning the discourses that perpetuate themselves even in the moment of their deconstruction.

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Bricolajul mitului. Recitirea după cincizeci de ani a lui Derrida citindu-l pe Lévi-Strauss

Rezumat

Dintre prezentările de la simpozionul din 1966 intitulat „Limbajele criticii și Științele Umane”, niciuna nu a fost atât de mitologizat precum lectura lui Derrida din opera lui Claude Lévi-Strauss din „Structura, semnul și jocul în discursul științelor umane”. Cu această lucrare, se spune că Derrida l-a detronat pe Lévi-Strauss din poziția sa privilegiată din domeniul etnologiei, prefigurând o critică mai amănunțită care avea să apară în *Gramatologia*. Privind în urmă la memoria acum hegemonică a acestor critici revelăm în operele ambilor teoreticieni niște operații mai nuanțate și problematice decât permit istoriile populare. Prin reconsiderarea lecturilor lui Derrida cu o atenție mai mare asupra operelor lui Lévi-Strauss, augmentate de perspectiva oferită de Audre Lorde, putem începe să eliberăm textele discutate de miturile care s-au creat în jurul acestora pentru a înțelege mai bine rolul etnocentrismului și al autocriticii în opera celor doi gânditori.